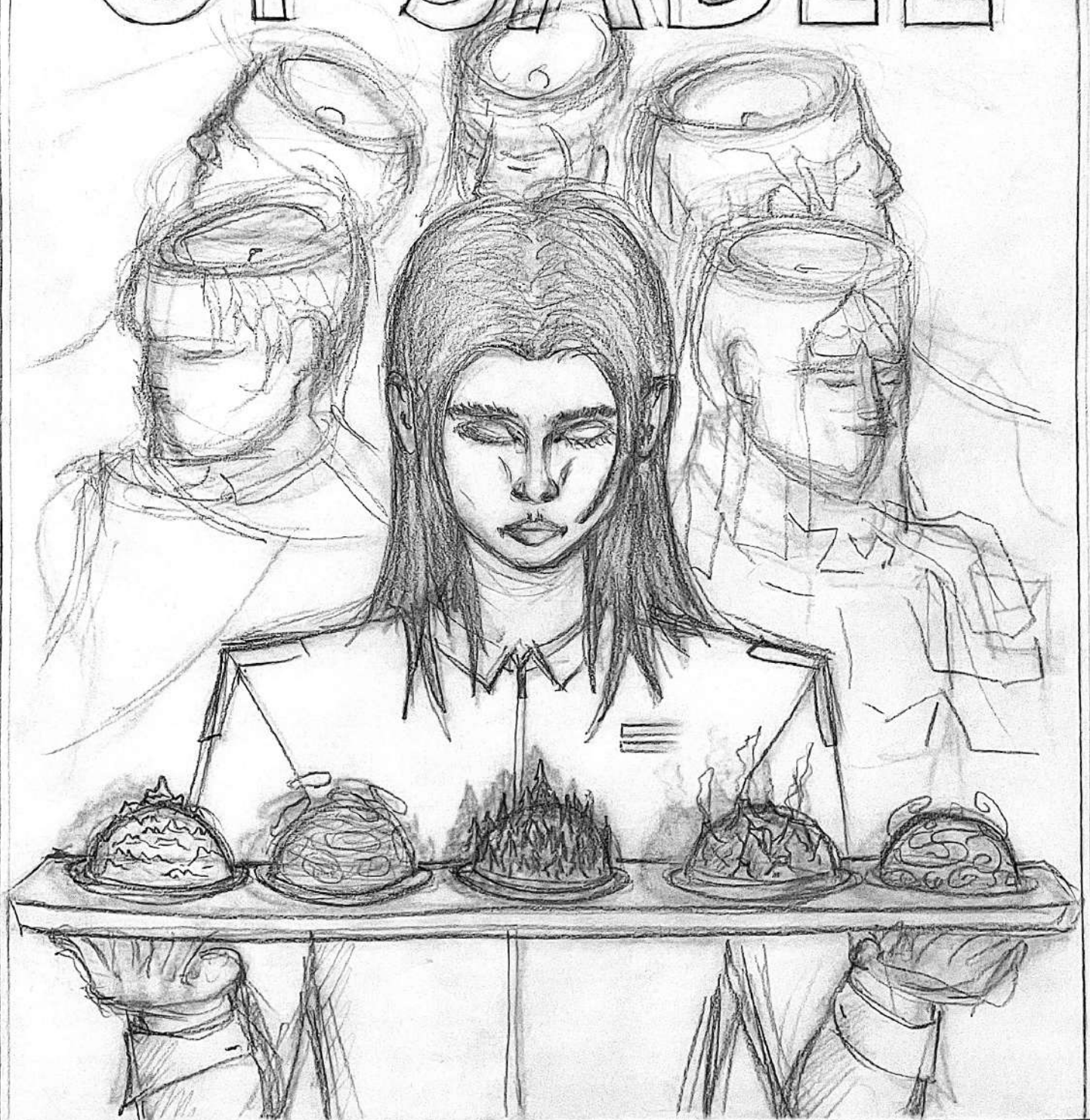


R Y A N D U V A L

DIVISION OF SABEL



CHAPTER ZERO

“You ruined my life,” says the girl to the man locked in ice, studying his peaceful expression, certain he will wake at any moment to either give her the response she is searching for, or fight back. But, the man does not stir. “Do you have *anything* to say for yourself?”

Still, nothing.

She averts her gaze, feeling guilty for uttering those words. *He is family, and he did not plan for things to be like this*, she reminds herself. “Do you at least know the coefficient to calculate time debt when traveling at sixty-four percent light speed?” she asks with pursed lips and a furrowed brow. “Of course not...”

A shuffling of feet and the knocking of a cane enters the room. The girl quickly gathers herself, pretending to be fully immersed in her Warp Engineering exam studies.

“I figured you’d be here,” says the good doctor, in the dawn of his centennial years, having just celebrated his one-hundredth birthday with a real cake from System Sol, one the girl can still taste in her imagination.

She does not face the doctor. “I’m always here... So, *that’s* a safe bet.”

The doctor’s villainous cane stops next to her and he places a gentle palm against the frozen man’s cryotube. “Brick by brick, my friend...”

The girl finally faces the doctor. “There *are* no bricks on this ship.”

The doctor chuckles. “You are your mother’s daughter, all right.” He points at her holotile. “Seven point five, three, six.”

“What?” the girl responds.

“That’s the coefficient,” the doctor says.

She inputs the number and the equation comes to fruition. The girl eyes the doctor. “How do you know this?”

“I’m tracking the time debts your family is accruing,” he says. “I’m sorry to say that you’ve already caught your siblings in age and might even catch your father when he returns.”

The girl thinks upon the last moment she spent with her family, eight years ago, as they boarded individual racing corsairs, each destined for a different edge of the galaxy, ready to embark upon a nearly impossible endeavor. *An endeavor whose information I’m not privy to*, she knows and looks upon the man in ice. *And it’s all because of you...* She points at the cryotube and snaps, “At this rate, I’ll be as old as Grandpa when he wakes!”

The doctor sighs. “I know it’s not fair... Life is *never* fair.” He takes a deep breath. “Your mother has returned... ahead of schedule.”

I know, the girl wants to say, having sensed it somewhere deep within herself. *But, I’m not like them. I don’t have the gift.* She eyes the doctor again, knowing what he is about to ask. “Do I have to go?”

The doctor gives her a look. “We *all* have to go.”

“It’s just the cindarians,” she says.

The doctor makes a face. “They have been our *strongest* ally since the beginning of the Council’s formation. They have solutions to the qadernan’s food crisis we cannot replicate.”

That’s certainly true, the girl knows, having spent a decade in low Qaderna orbit as mother searched for a local solution to their plight. *But the Cindarians hold the answers, apparently.* She closes her holotile and stands. “Fine, let’s go.”

They exit her grandfather’s lonesome room to an arterial hallway that runs the entire length of an old Solaran medical frigate, converted into an emissary vessel and rechristened *The Phoenix*. The doctor hobbles ahead, his cane echoing differently as they pass the ship’s many operating

and recovery rooms turned into small conference and emissary suites. The girl closes her eyes and listens to each echo's pitch and resonance, trying to gauge the size of each room. When she peeks into the rooms, she sees that her estimations are close. *And soon they will be teeming with people, cindarians, and qadernans.*

"You'll need to change into Council cloth if you are to greet your mother," the doctor says, breaking their silence.

The girl rolls her eyes. "Were you sent by Grandma to make sure I behave?"

"Yes," the doctor confirms. "But I enjoy your company, regardless."

"Liar," the girl grumbles. "I'm just another one of your projects."

He subtly turns his head. "You're not like your brother and sister, or your mother and father, and this intrigues me, I admit. Studying you helps me understand how we might save your grandfather. But, that does not change the fact that I genuinely like you."

She purses her lips, knowing the doctor's blatant honesty is one of his defining qualities. "Does the gift ever awaken late?" she asks to change the subject, remembering how desperately she tried competing with her brother and sister as a child to impress her parents. *But they never considered me exceptional... And then, they left.*

"I don't know," the doctor says.

"Some geneticist you are..." she mumbles to herself.

They pass the last of The Phoenix's converted operating rooms into the ship's delicate observation bridge connecting the rear emissary quarters and warp engines to Forward Command, crew barracks, and docking bays. Solid walls become clear polycarbonate, displaying Qaderna glowing electric red below with its cloud-cover reflecting Gliese's red dwarf sunlight against vast marshland grasses.

But the planet should appear black to humans, disappearing against space, the girl knows, and that it is because of the window's color-shifting of infrared light into a human spectrum that it can be seen. *Which means, the marshland is not actually red.*

A small qadernan fleet appears like specks at the planet's horizon. The girl senses her mother within one, standing beside a cindarian.

“Why did the Council send my mother again?” she asks.

“She represents our home world, and thus, our ancient past,” the doctor answers. “Because of this many beings of the galaxy consider your mother the one true representative of humanity.”

The qadernan fleet grows in size as it nears and begins deceleration to match The Phoenix’s geosynchronous orbit.

The bridge’s clear walls are overtaken by cramped crew quarters as the girl and doctor enter the forward section of the ship.

The doctor stops at the girl’s room. “We don’t have much time.”

“I’ll be quick,” the girl snips, opens her door, and plunges into disorganized chaos. *The summation of my life*, she thinks, pushing through laundry floating in zero-G like thick vegetation of a jungle. She finds two sets of Council cloth stuffed in an old case, worn only a few times to greet dignitaries stopping in to see grandmother. She pulls out both sets and gives them shakes. *Wrinkled to hell...* She then notices specks of mold and gives the clothing apprehensive sniffs. *And musty as hell...*

“They’re beginning docking maneuvers,” the doctor calls through the door with a tone saying, *hurry up!*

The girl strips to her magsuit, then slips on the less revolting of her Council cloth, picking off the specks of mold as best as she can and pressing it flat against her body, hoping her heat will relax the wrinkles. But, when she removes her hands from herself, the cloth floats with a mind of its own and scrunches together. She emerges from her quarters to see the doctor’s nose crinkle and his eyes narrow.

“You *can’t* be serious,” he says.

“This is all I have,” she responds.

“You smell abysmal.”

“The cindarians don’t have a sense of smell, they won’t care,” she argues.

“But their uniforms are impeccably pressed,” the doctor retorts.

“That’s because they’re made of heat, not because they *care*,” she says. “I’ll just stand next to them. That should do the trick.”

The doctor sighs deeply and motions a reluctant hand up the corridor to where the docking bays reside.

The girl grins, hustles ahead of the doctor, and plunges into a palpable urgency emanating from the crew. The qadernan fleet, consisting of several warships encircling an emissary vessel, slows to a stop outside. A shuttle breaks from the vessel. The girl watches the bustling crew aligning to either side of airlock four, standing at attention. Among the sea of blue Solaran uniforms is an older woman in dark red with a distinctive Biographer's Guild crest upon her lapel, standing at parade rest like the crew.

Because Grandma is a soldier too, the girl reflects.

The doctor approaches the girl's grandmother and gives a nod. Her grandmother responds in kind, then her eyes dart the girl's way, giving a quick study of her wrinkled Council cloth. She grins.

Grandma's just happy I showed up, the girl knows and takes her place alongside her and the doctor, directly across from airlock four. And when she looks about she makes eye contact with a boy standing a few places beside her dressed in his own Council cloth, though pressed flat.

He smiles and gives a little wave.

The girl tightens her lips and returns a quick wave, hoping the boy will leave it at that. But, being the only other passenger aboard this ship the same age as she, the girl knows avoiding a conversation is futile.

The boy's eyes light up and he looks about to step forth when the Docking Bay's com blips and he halts.

Saved, the girl thinks and focuses on airlock four.

"Shuttle contact in three... two... one..." the dock master calls from his viewing post outside the ship.

A slight nudge is felt through the girl's feet and a subtle hissing begins.

"...Equalization commencing."

"Atten-hut!" cries the ship's captain, taking a position affront the airlock and facing his crew. "We are about to welcome home Representative Sicondra of Earth escorting Ambassador Schoonez of Cindar! The continued existence of the qadernan civilization rests upon this meeting! Understood!?"

"Yes, sir!" they shout in unison.

A pit forms in the girl's stomach, remembering the last time she saw her mother eight years ago. *Will I recognize her?* she thinks, fearful of how much her mother might have aged. *But, from her perspective, she's only been gone for a year,* the girl knows, and looks at herself, imagining how she appeared when she was ten years old. *Will Mother recognize me?*

An indicator above the airlock door shifts from red to yellow, then to green. The captain quickly spins and steps back to join the crew at attention.

"Equalization complete," the dock master announces. *"Airlock doors opening."*

A clunk resonates through the now silent docking bay, followed by a series of thumps and whines. With a final ratcheting, the airlock door drifts open. Several soldiers in heavy exo-rigs emerge first, giving quick salutes to the captain, then standing statuesque beside the open airlock. Next come attendants in Council cloth, taking position at one side of the airlock.

From her peripheral vision, the girl sees the boy straighten up in anticipation. *Because his mother is one of the attendants and this is his first time seeing her since she left, just like me and mine.*

Strange shapes follow the human attendants, wavering back and forth, appearing like balloons gripping the floor to keep from drifting away.

You've got to be joking! the girl thinks, desperately keeping her mouth closed, suppressing laughter begging to erupt. A nudge from the good doctor nearly sends her into hysterics. *Balloons! They're fucking balloons!* the girl cannot help thinking, but she knew this already having studied their anatomy in her xeno-biology courses.

The cindarians wear traditional black cloth, draped over squarish frames, contrasting greatly with their white hot faces, and the sound of peeling velcro emits from their gecko grippy feet with every step. Thin arms wrap around their backs and spindly hands clasp together in a military-like stance.

Pull it together! the girl orders herself and takes several Ergonos breaths learned training with her siblings years ago, hoping that she

remembers how to do them. Breathing sounds come from beside her, and the girl knows her grandmother is giving the same breaths to help her match. After several, she feels in sync with her grandmother. Her bursting hysteria subsides.

Two final figures pass through the airlock hatch.

The first is short and boxy.

The former Council Representative Schoonez, the girl knows. *Ambassador Schoonez now that they've seceded from the Council of Colonies, citing irreconcilable differences...* She contemplates that. *And now we're asking for their help... How is this going to work?* Where the cindarian attendants hold a comicalness, Ambassador Schoonez possesses an aura, transforming its strange proportions and silliness into elegance and strength. *And its face...* The girl remembers what she studied about them, how they are born of fire, appearing white hot, but as they experience strife, time and again escaping death, they become like black cinders. *And the former representative is nearly as black as space*, she notes, recognizing the brutality of its life.

The second figure is tall and strong, with impeccable posture apparent beneath white Council cloth.

Mother...

"Representative Sicondra of Earth and Ambassador Schoonez of Cindar!" cries the captain.

The crew snaps a salute, and so does the girl's grandmother. The human attendants bow deeply as the cindarian attendants rise up. The soldiers in exo-rigs do not move a muscle, as if they are decor.

"At ease, Captain," Mother says, returning a quick salute, her exotic Terran accent sending shivers down the girl's spine.

The captain and crew lower hands and slide into parade rest as the human attendants snap straight up with their hands at their sides. Sounds of a roaring flame, accompanied by a campfire's pops and hisses, comes, and the cindarian attendants lower to the floor.

It takes the girl a moment to understand that Ambassador Schoonez just spoke in its native language.

The ambassador and representative pass beyond their attendants, the

cindarian's charcoal face locked onto the girl's grandmother.

The attendants disband, racing to meet loved ones waiting patiently to the side. The boy waves at his mother who stops in her tracks and covers her mouth in disbelief. She looks him up and down, then rushes to embrace her son.

The girl waits in nervous stillness as her own mother approaches beside the ambassador, but her eyes hold tremendous worry and dart side to side. She turns back to speak with the captain again as the ambassador reaches grandmother. Incredible heat wafts over the girl, instantly smoothing the wrinkles in her Council cloth and singeing the remaining mold specks away. She glances at the doctor to catch his eye roll.

"Sss... Claraaa Ocol..." hisses the ambassador. "It iss a pleassure to sssee you once again... Sss." The cindarian rises in its custom.

Grandmother responds in kind, lifting onto her tiptoes with arms clasped behind her lumbar. "It has been too long, Ambassador."

"It hasss... indeed." The ambassador shifts its attention to the doctor. "...And it iss a pleassure to sssee you ass well... Doctor Lee..."

"It is an honor to see you again," the doctor responds, trying his best to lift onto his toes. "I am surprised you remember me. We met only once, briefly at Zion's funeral."

The cindarian motions to itself. "My memory isss... literally etched into ssstone... I cannot forget... Sss."

A cindarian attendant comes to the ambassador's side and whispers something in their ashen tongue.

"I apologize... Clara and Doctor Lee..." the ambassador says, "but I mussst attend to an urgent matter... Let usss... make time to properly reminissque."

"Absolutely, Your Excellency," Grandmother says and again rises on her toes.

The moment the cindarian turns away, the girl's mother comes strutting up to her grandmother, her eyes shifting up and down.

Soaking in how much Grandma's aged, the girl knows.

"Clara, Doctor Lee, it's wonderful to see you two again, but we have an emergency," Mother whispers. "We discovered something terrible upon

Cindar... And... we made contact with *him*.”

“Did you get a blood sample?” the doctor whispers back.

“Hair,” Mother says and slips a small capsule into the good doctor’s hand. “He’s working with the Angels of Sedition.”

“Those pirates?” the doctor says with a confused look.

“We must talk privately. They’re planning something horrific but I cannot fathom what. “She pauses. “Has Aizen made contact?”

Grandmother shakes her head.

“What about Juniper and Mason?” Mother follows up.

“It’s been silence from them all,” Grandmother says.

Mother gives a frustrated sigh and looks about the docking bay. “Where’s Sabel? She’s supposed to be here to greet me.”

Grandmother and the doctor freeze. Neither utter a word.

The girl’s stomach tightens and her eyes well with tears. With all her strength and composure, she says, “I-I’m right here... Mom...”